

Information for Parents/Caregivers

OF ADOLESCENTS WITH DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY

This information is intended for parents and other caregivers of adolescents who struggle with depression or anxiety. It was co-developed with caregivers with lived experience.



Here are some key messages that are thought to be important for anyone in this role.

1

This is hard

Parenting an adolescent is complicated. Healthy adolescent development involves some risk-taking, experimentation and need for autonomy and privacy. This stage of life also involves a lot of unpredictable changes. The complexity of development increases when adolescents experience symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, which may include suicidal ideas or self-harm. In this context, parents/caregivers can experience a wide variety of emotions in themselves, including sadness, anxiety, shame, guilt, anger, frustration, irritation, numbness, resignation, exhaustion, and/or other emotions that are hard to name. All of these emotions are common and normal. It is important to validate your own emotions and have compassion for yourself in the process.

2

Allow for enough space

Adolescents often want to keep mental health information confidential from parents/caregivers. For the adolescent to build trust with clinicians this confidentiality is important. If you feel “out of the loop”, know that clinicians will be working with the adolescent over time towards more open communication with parents/caregivers. Often trust between the adolescent and clinician first needs to be established as this helps the adolescent feel comfortable to take the needed steps to get better. Unless you have a very immediate safety concern, we recommend collaborating with your adolescent about how and when you reach out to the clinical team. Respecting your teen's need for space is incredibly challenging, at the same time, this respect helps build trust in your relationship. We recommend being open and respectful of your adolescent's growing ability to manage their own treatment.

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Be active in the care process

Taking an active role in the treatment can seem like the opposite of “allowing space”, but you can do both at the same time.

This might include:

- letting the adolescent know that you are hoping to be involved and are available for support when they are ready.
- learning about strategies to enhance open and supportive communication with the adolescent through reading, seminars, videos, support groups (see attached resource information).
- focusing on collaboration and maintaining a positive relationship with the adolescent.
- supporting siblings and extended family members who may be unsure how to react to your loved one with depression or anxiety. This may include providing educational materials to decrease stigma and/or asking family members to offer their physical presence (i.e., offer their company) without asking for anything or adding any pressure).

[Learn more about educational materials](#) 

- being ready to join clinical meetings when the adolescent is ready.
- with the adolescent's agreement, observing them; notice changes in the way they are talking or acting, but leave judgments out of it. It can be helpful for the clinical team to have a different perspective on what is happening.
- letting the adolescent know that they are not responsible for managing your emotions as you navigate the process. Many adolescents are concerned that they will burden parents/caregivers.
- learning to regulate your own emotions more effectively to model skill-learning for the adolescent.

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Managing risk is like a dance

Many, but not all, adolescents with depression or anxiety struggle with substance use, suicidal ideas, and self-harm. As a caregiver, knowing that adolescents with depression or anxiety are at increased risk for substance use, suicidal thinking and self-harm can be scary. It is important to recognize your own feelings before reacting. It is important to note that regardless of the intent of self-harm, it represents significant risk. Each of these symptoms are typically monitored by the clinical team. Even with the best of intentions, within a family, different parents/caregivers can sometimes take extreme approaches – either being way too restrictive or way too relaxed about these risks. The most effective strategies might involve starting somewhere in the middle and shifting your approach over time. From a clinician's perspective, the goal is for the adolescent to learn how to manage these thoughts and actions on their own and/or through collaboration with caregivers/parents. There is no “one size fits all” approach to managing this risk and the most effective approach may change over time.

5

Understanding the role of medications

While medication options are part of the treatment for depression or anxiety in adolescents, they are just one part. Adolescents are typically considered capable of making their own decisions around medications for these conditions; ideally, with parent/caregiver input on the decision. Sometimes adolescents refuse medication and the parent/caregiver really wants the adolescent to take it. This can lead to conflict. If this is the case in your family, we recommend respecting the adolescent's preference to not take the medication for two reasons: (a) The evidence for these medications in adolescents is mixed; overall we see modest to moderate benefit over placebo. (b) The adolescent would likely benefit more from having a sense of control in their treatment and less conflict in family interactions. Decisions about medications involve ongoing conversations; adolescents often change their mind. Expressing curiosity (without judgments) about their perspective on medications may facilitate these conversations. It may seem like a big leap of faith when your adolescent is making their own treatment and medication decisions and it is important for your adolescent to have autonomy along with focusing on your relationship with them.

[Learn more about medication options](#) ➡

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Taking care of yourself

Effectively parenting an adolescent with depression or anxiety will take some energy.

Eating well, exercise, and good sleep can all help make sure you have the energy to be effective in this role. If you struggle with your own mental health concerns, please speak to your family doctor or, if available, consider starting in therapy for yourself. Take some time to learn self-compassion and self-validation as this is a marathon alongside your adolescent.

7

Find a community of support

Gather support for yourself within your family, community, or through external

resources to navigate this complex process. There are several options out there for parents/caregivers to get support from peers and professionals. These networks can be invaluable.

8

There is hope

Sometimes it can be difficult to imagine things changing. At the same time change is inevitable. Keep in mind that adolescents can recover from depression; and, if symptoms remain, learn to manage symptoms more effectively. Maintain this hope to motivate you through the hard times. Persistence, patience, compassion, connection, and acceptance can really pay off.